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Feature

A Knight at the Opera

With his epic *War and Peace* opening next month at the Met, Alberto Vilar has become classical music's greatest booster since the Medicis. But is the billionaire piper also calling the tune?

- By Robert Hiltferty
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Been There, Don That: Vilar (with Don Ottavio) in his UN Plaza living room.

My only vice, Alberto Vilar confesses between sips from a Starbucks cup, "is hot coffee. I don't drink, and I don't smoke."

We are sitting in the sun-drenched living room of his vast East Side duplex. A Henry Moret hangs just over the shoulder of the 61-year-old billionaire, who once contemplated joining the priesthood. Yet it's neither the panoramic view nor the canvas that makes the room remarkable. It's the life-size statue of a young, violin-toting Mozart, his back turned defiantly to Donald Trump's 90-story Trump World Tower across the ether. And the imposing bronze of Don Ottavio, from Wolfgang Amadeus's *Don Giovanni*. And the miniature facsimiles of the Metropolitan Opera's Austrian crystal chandeliers glittering above the dining-room table. Oh, and the frescoes overhead, copies of the rococo paintings in Salzburg's famed Mozarteum concert hall.

Finally, there is the gaping hole in the hallway floor that soon will anchor a spiral staircase leading to the floor below, where Vilar is building a 70-seat auditorium for private performances of the musical arts he supports so lavishly -- to the tune of more than \$225 million to date, including \$45 million to the Met alone.

Though Vilar fought Trump unsuccessfully over the building of that view-sullying tower, the high-tech philanthropist and the real-estate mogul share a trait beyond their billions: the tendency, admired by some, abhorred by others, to have their name in high-profile places.

In New York, Vilar's moniker adorns the Vilar Grand Tier at the Metropolitan Opera and the Alberto Vilar Music Lodge on Shelter Island. In Colorado, there's the Vilar Center for the Arts in tony Beaver Creek and the Ford Amphitheater/Vilar Pavilion in tony Vail.

Then there are the countless programs that carry his name, from the



No Bohèmes Here: Vilar's opulent home includes a statue of the young Mozart.

Maazel/Vilar Conductors' Competition, inaugurated this season by the New York Philharmonic, and NYU's Alberto Vilar Global Fellows in the Performing Arts, to the Kennedy Center's Vilar Institute for Arts Management. And we haven't even gotten to the Continent yet. A one-man crusader on a mission to save Big Opera, Vilar has underwritten scores of productions around the world, more often than not joint projects that travel from company to company.

"He is the most passionate music lover you could imagine," says Franz Xaver Ohnesorg, intendant, or managing director, of the Berlin Philharmonic. "He's very generous, not only financially, but in his thinking about what an institution should do, because he wants to be the great model."

On Valentine's Day, Prokofiev's epic *War and Peace*, a co-production with the Kirov financed by Vilar, opens at the Met under the baton of his favorite conductor, Valery Gergiev, and staged by filmmaker Andrei Konchalovsky. The production has already won acclaim in St. Petersburg, London, and Milan.

"There are no anonymous gifts today," Vilar insists, though he's served as column fodder over the issue for years; one British critic called him "a very large chequebook with a 60-year-old Cuban-American attached." Vilar fumes at such characterizations. "What is the value of some journalist whacking me for making a gift that's going to benefit many people?" he asks. "I want to say, 'Now, wait a minute, let me get this straight. This guy alone gave this amount of money. This guy alone is influencing the survival of opera, and you are annoyed with the fact that his name is up there?' It doesn't make any sense."

Impatient, he adds that, like Andrew Carnegie, he courts the spotlight in order "to set an example for others, so that they might give, too." On the other hand, it also is true that no one will ever call Alberto Vilar the phantom of the opera.

Vilar wakes up at 5:15 each morning, usually skips breakfast, and truncates his lunch hour so he can put in a twelve-hour work day at Amerindo, the Park Avenue investment firm he co-founded in 1979, and still be free by curtain time. Early on, he and his partner, Gary Tanaka, sank all their investment expertise into companies at the forefront of digital technologies -- Microsoft, Cisco, and the like -- and made a lot of money fast. Today, his private world includes five homes, the use of a private jet, and a lot of tuxedos. But Vilar has been giving money away since well before he had millions to give.

"Even back in our poorer days, when we just started our operation," says Tanaka, who now works out of Amerindo's London office, "he was always interested in philanthropy."

Vaguely Jesuitical in appearance -- you can easily imagine a clerical collar around his neck -- Vilar seemed to come out of nowhere several years back, when his name started popping up everywhere. Three summers ago, he raised eyebrows in Austria, where, as the largest donor in the Salzburg Music Festival's 81-year history, he got a full-page color photo of himself in every program book. At the Met, his support has surpassed even that of Sybil Harrington, whose name adorns the main auditorium.

In return for his largesse, he doesn't think it's at all farfetched to take an onstage bow with the singers and conductor on the opening night of a production he's underwritten. "What makes me less important than Plácido Domingo?" he asks Johanna Fiedler in her just-published Met exposé, *Molto Agitato*. On opening night at the Vienna State Opera this year, Vilar was brought onstage, lauded, and applauded for installing his Vilar Titles in the house -- the same libretto-translating system found on the back seats of

the Met (indeed, last year Vilar became majority shareholder in Figaro Systems, the Santa Fe company that developed the technology for the titles). He was given a medal. The minister of culture and his deputy were in attendance. Afterward, Vilar and the entourage walked to Town Hall square, where another celebration took place, with 5,000 present. Vilar made a short speech in German.

"I put this together to honor this man and what he is doing for this country," says Ioan Holender, the company's intendant; he insists Vilar had nothing to do with it. Nonetheless, Vilar is not reticent when he feels underappreciated. At the gala dinner for the new production of *Ariadne auf Naxos* in Salzburg last summer, he complained to me that the president of Austria had neglected to praise him on the opening day of the festival.



"He did not even say, 'We have the biggest donor of this place in our midst. We thank him. Wouldn't it be nice if everyone followed his example?' Didn't say a word," Vilar fumed, indignant. "That's a mistake. That is an *absolute mistake*." Vilar argued that the glaring oversight compromised the crucial role he has begun to play in European culture. As once-huge government subsidies for the arts, which have always put America to shame, dry up, American-style private philanthropy will assume a greater role in the deficit-reducing European Union. Vilar wants to be a modern-day Medici.

Last October, he toured several major German cities, giving arts administrators pep talks and how-to demonstrations on private philanthropy. Ohnesorg calls him the "avant-gardist philanthropist."

Although Cuban, Vilar was born in Newark. His father was a senior executive at one of the world's biggest sugar companies, and his parents traveled to New York regularly. Vilar admits that his birth here may have been planned by his father in order to attain U.S. citizenship for his son. He spent his first nine years in Cuba, then moved to Puerto Rico, where his father ran several Cuban-owned sugar plantations. At an early age, Alberto was cut off from his mother.

"My mother was given her walking papers by my father, and that's all I ever knew," says Vilar, who apparently never thought to look her up again. Instead he and his two sisters were raised by their paternal grandmother, a lover of classical music with a crush on Mario Lanza.



>"She took me to see two movies he made," Vilar recalls, "and I said, 'Wow, what a voice!'" That was the beginning. A music nerd was born. But when he tried to share his enthusiasm by offering to play a recording of Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto* on record, his father angrily declined his son's invitation. The antagonism escalated: When Vilar expressed interest in playing the violin, his father cracked, "Cuban men do not play the violin." (It probably didn't help that Alberto also hated baseball.)

If the story begins to sound like a standard gay narrative, with the tyrannical macho father terrorizing the sensitive sissy son, Vilar insists that homophobia wasn't a part of it. "His principal fear was that I would not grow up to be a man," he says. "He thought I was headed for the priesthood." Vilar was raised as a good Catholic by his grandmother, while his father frequently burst into rabidly anti-Catholic diatribes. One day, seeing Vilar decked out as an altar boy, he barked, "I don't want to see you in that funny dress again!"

Was there really no suspicion of homosexuality? "Well, there was a doubt in *his* mind, because I was 263 percent shy with girls," admits Vilar, who married at 45 and divorced five and a half years later, and has no children. His womanizing father, on the other hand, "had more girlfriends than I have operas."

When the family lost everything to the Castro revolution, Vilar followed his father's advice and took a job at Citibank in New York, later earning a master's degree in economics at Iona College in New Rochelle. The money really started rolling in soon after he started his own company; he made his first million in 1981. He bought his father a nice home and a BMW, and sent him to Las Vegas four times a year. But the old antagonism never let up, Vilar recalls: When Dad got wind of his son's growing charitable donations, he'd growl, "You're gonna give *who* money? What about me?"

Vilar entertains a fantasy that he could have been a prodigy if it weren't for his father. To see him at the Met, you can't help but feel the passion that fuels his giving. He always sits in the first row, on the aisle, so he can see and feel every aspect of the spectacle with the expectant thrill his father could never squash.

"What you have is 100 well-trained musicians in the pit playing the world's greatest music," he says. "You've got a handful of the best singers in the world. You've got a well-trained chorus. You probably have a piece of great literature or drama turned into a libretto. You have theater; you have coordination. I think it's the highest art form. Then when you superimpose a Zeffirelli production -- with lighting, costume, and set design -- you die and go to heaven."

When political parties come seeking donations, Vilar says, "Only if you put music education in your platform." (That's when the calls generally stop.) He doesn't hang out with Wall Street types. "Ninety percent of my socializing is with either intensive people into music like myself, people who live for the music, or artists," he says. "Those are my friends. I don't have time beyond that."

And yet today he speaks kindly about his father, now dead, whom he nonetheless describes as a "misguided klutz with an extraordinarily misplaced bias." He has forgiven him. ("That's what Catholics are supposed to do!") Indeed, his father seems to be the only person from whom Alberto never demanded a thank you.

Whatever the critics make of his philanthropic style, it has endeared him to many of the world's top directors, conductors, and singers, not to mention the managers who must pay them.

"His generosity is far beyond anything that has preceded it," says diva Renée Fleming, a friend. "Those who were skeptical have been won over."

Actually, not quite all. In December 1999, when Vilar Floral Hall was unveiled at Covent Garden, and later, when it was announced that Vilar Titles would be installed there, the British press treated the billionaire as if he'd scrawled graffiti on a national monument. One journalist characterized him as a "one-man globalisation merchant" whose "tentacles stretch from St. Petersburg to Los Angeles by way of Salzburg, Glyndebourne and Washington, and wherever else opera is a ritzy, glamorous affair." Another acknowledged, grudgingly, that "the future of international opera and ballet now depends to a startling extent on Alberto Vilar."

That's not far from the truth: Vilar has become the biggest benefactor in the history of classical music. The Medici analogy is apt in at least one sense: The Renaissance patrons effected, through their pocketbook, the emergence of a new musico-dramatic form on the occasion of a wedding in 1600. When Maria de' Medici married Henri IV of France, Jacopo Peri's seminal *Eurydice* was performed. That piece

inspired a guest at the party, Vincenzo Gonzaga, to copycat-commission a superior composer in his hometown of Mantua. The result was Claudio Monteverdi's groundbreaking *La Favola d'Orfeo (The Legend of Orpheus)*. Opera was born -- and a hit.

Opera is now entering its fifth century, and Vilar is determined to keep it alive for another five. He has few other cultural interests (he hates movies) and -- unlike the Medicis -- isn't interested in expanding the repertory; he doesn't commission new work and has no soft spot for small, struggling companies. "Some people have criticized me for not doing that," he admits, "but I already said what I'm going to do: help the big guys set a standard."

Though Vilar's taste is conservative, he has his eccentricities; at the Met, he underwrote a quirky and monumental *Doktor Faust*, for example, and he's one of the few people who liked Robert Wilson's freakish yet transcendental *Lohengrin*.

At the same time, Vilar shares his riches with institutions that, while respected and well-established, can't be called world-class (at least not yet): the Washington Opera and the Los Angeles Opera. It's no accident that he picked those two houses. His dear friend the superstar Plácido Domingo is artistic director of both. Vilar will give his money to powerful, charismatic individuals whose leadership he admires and trusts. His money followed Michael Kaiser, with whom he established a relationship at Covent Garden, to the Kennedy Center, where, among other things, Kaiser created the arts-management program that bears Vilar's name. His money followed Ohnesorg, a "guy who buzzes with ideas," from Carnegie Hall to the Berlin Philharmonic.

Perhaps the most vital personal alliance Vilar has formed is with Valery Gergiev, the charismatic conductor and artistic director of the Kirov Opera in St. Petersburg. Vilar -- who spends part of his summers at Gergiev's White Nights festival in St. Petersburg when he's not at Salzburg -- arguably kept this company afloat with his gift of \$14 million during its hand-to-mouth post-Soviet years -- and there is talk of expanding the Kirov Theater (called the Mariinsky at home).

The money he's already donated to the Kirov finances young artists' programs and underwrites six new productions. Vilar likes co-productions, which give the operas he bankrolls more mileage; it's an old concept and a most effective one. The money Vilar has given to Covent Garden, La Scala, and Los Angeles allowed the Kirov-Met co-production to travel to those houses. (His enormous donation to the Kennedy Center includes a program that will bring the Kirov over on a regular basis.)

"It's a smart scenario where you don't have to create five different productions," says Gergiev, who was also recently named principal guest conductor at the Met. "You can share it with so many thousands of opera lovers in so many countries. So far, *War and Peace* is the biggest success we scored together."

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This is what some people see as the "globalization" of opera, but in reality, in addition to making economic sense, it represents only a fraction of opera production in the world. At the same time, Vilar can joke, Dr. Mabuse-style, "In another two or three years, I'll have a call on 40 percent of tomorrow's singers, who are coming out of my artists' programs."

Not surprisingly, the issue of artistic meddling is a nagging leitmotif in Vilar's life. When the San Francisco Opera was shopping for a new general director, Vilar contacted the headhunter and said that if the board chose either Sarah Billinghurst (from the Met) or Gerard Mortier (formerly at the Salzburg Festival), it could expect a "substantial gift." As the story is usually told, when the company chose Pamela Rosenberg, Vilar cut it off and sent his money to Los Angeles.

Though Franklin "Pitch" Johnson, chairman of the San Francisco Opera board, insists Vilar's offer wasn't improper, he adds that "we thought about it only for a moment, and we immediately declined the offer. It was very nice, but we didn't want that hovering over us when we made the decision."

He says the idea of sending the "promised" money to Los Angeles instead is not a connection anyone in San Francisco made. "In L.A., he was establishing a whole new program," Pitch says. That makes sense: Plácido Domingo is there -- which suggests that L.A. was going to get money anyway. Projects there include mounting a spectacular *Ring* cycle with special effects by George Lucas's Industrial Light & Magic, and resurrecting zarzuela, Spanish operetta -- a passion shared by these two Latin honchos. Johnson also said there was no anger or resentment on his part.

But would they have accepted the money if they'd picked one of Vilar's choices? "If he wanted to give us money later because we chose the person he liked, I guess we wouldn't turn it down -- it's hard enough to finance opera as it is."

Vilar is not embarrassed about using his wallet to influence that decision (as many suspect it was flashed at the New York Philharmonic shortly before the appointment of Lorin Maazel, with whom Vilar set up an international conductors' competition, to succeed Kurt Masur; both Maazel and Vilar strongly deny any quid pro quo). But his choler rises again at any suggestion of artistic meddling. "They insult the recipients, not me," he charges. "They say Joe Volpe is a whore who takes my money and lets me run the show," he adds, referring to the Met's powerful general manager. Michael Kaiser agrees: "He's never once asked me to change a program in order to mirror what he thinks it should be. He's not a meddling donor -- I've dealt with meddling donors."

It's not as if Vilar is pushing his untalented girlfriends onstage à la Citizen Kane, or wants to direct a *Ring* cycle himself, or, even worse, wants a zarzuela he composed himself given a "Live From Lincoln Center" broadcast. Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Manuela Hoelterhoff, who turned a sharp and cynical eye on the opera world in her book *Cinderella and Company*, thinks Vilar should meddle more at the Met. "Clearly, Volpe and Levine are aesthetically highly unreliable," says Hoelterhoff. "The greatest disasters do not bear Vilar's name -- shows like the recent *Norma*. Maybe he should pay to have himself cloned as a final act of charity."

"There are some people who help, and want to be recognized, but they don't go," says Domingo, another

close friend. "He's saying, 'I really love this, it's not just something that I do.' " And what Gergiev loves about Vilar is that he shuts up and listens: "In front of me, he never speaks too much, which is maybe the greatest quality I enjoy. I don't like people who talk and talk and talk." Vilar did once try to meddle at the Met -- not artistically but financially: He wanted the company to invest more intelligently, but being a conservative institution, the Met couldn't afford to flirt with Vilar's high-yield, high-risk roller-coaster method. And it could be a good thing the Met didn't let him near its portfolio, because his company's public mutual fund, Amerindo Technology, fell more than 50 percent in 2001, according to several published reports. This has sent shivers through the companies he supports, which wonder -- privately, of course -- whether Vilar will be able to keep up the commitments he has made. A shortfall would be devastating for all the companies he supports in light of the recession and also, at the Met and the Philharmonic, Mayor Bloomberg's likely decision to delay the city's contribution to the \$1.2 billion renovation of Lincoln Center.

"Mayor Bloomberg inherited a less than optimal fiscal situation, and people have to expect widespread cutbacks," Vilar concedes. "As a private supporter of the arts, I would hope that the music lovers of New York would do whatever they can to make the redevelopment project a success."

And Vilar says he's unfazed, insisting to me that everything he's promised will be delivered "safe and sound." Moreover, he still believes that the greatest Internet explosion is just around the corner, and that "in the next ten years you are going to see the biggest advances in the delivery of human therapeutics to treat formerly untreatable diseases because of recombinant technologies, genomics -- all of that."

What few people in the music world know is that Vilar's philanthropy includes health care -- although this interest has a distinctly musical ring. Aside from his involvement with the Department of Neurological Surgery at Columbia University, he gave \$4.1 million in 1998 to the Hospital for Special Surgery, to set up the Alberto Vilar Hand and Upper Extremity Research Center. Then there's the Cornell/ Salzburg Medical Program, which convenes in the castle featured in the final scene of *The Sound of Music*, bringing in a thousand doctors (dubbed Vilar fellows) each year from Eastern Europe to receive training from top doctors from top institutions in the West. And perhaps the *pièce de résistance*: He has given a major donation to set up the Alberto Vilar Voice Restoration Program at Harvard's Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. Vilar obviously wants to extend the shelf life of his favorite voices -- many of which, including those of Cecilia Bartoli and Hei-Kyung Hong, can be heard at tribute dinners that announce these donations.

Despite the 100 or more performances he attends each year, and the acclaim he has won, there is in the end something solitary about Vilar.

"The part of my life that definitely got shortchanged was the social part," he admits. He remains close to his ex-wife, flying her and her mother last year to the Bayreuth festival, and dining with her regularly. Wayne Koestenbaum, in *The Queen's Throat*, writes, "Opera has always suited those who failed at love." But Vilar seems never to have wasted much time on love in the first place. Except, of course, his love for opera.

"While all my friends were chasing girls in the pubs on Second Avenue, I was working," he says. "Ninety percent of the time I go to the opera, I go by myself. I don't need to drag a date. I'm enjoying it by myself."

Photographed by Jessica Wynne

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